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ABSTRACT

Our understanding of workplace learning is shaped by four dominant discourses that may be labeled the discourses of design, demand, development and desire. Within these different discourses, understanding of workplace learning is shaped and bounded by particular assumptions about the "self in context," which includes the organizational contexts of particular institutions or corporations and the broader sociocultural contexts in which workplace learning and these organizations are embedded. Differing conceptions of workplace learning both shape and are shaped by differing understandings of the self that is engaged in the learning process. The discourse of design stresses specific products to be derived from the design and implementation of specific workplace learning activities and reflects a largely individualistic and causal perspective on the process of workplace learning. The discourse of demand focuses on motivational issues and broader organizational contexts neglected by the discourse of design. The discourse of development offers a more holistic perspective on the workplace and the self as worker in organizational contexts and emphasizes the learning organization and the interconnectedness of all aspects of organizational life, including individual workers' overall well-being and development. The discourse of desire represents postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives on workplace learning and addresses issues such as workers' alienation and disaffection. (Contains 40 references) (MN)

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Design, Demand, Development, and Desire: A Symposium on the Discourses of Workplace Learning

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The purpose of this session is to explore more fully how each of these dominant discourses conceptualize the phenomenon of workplace learning, with particular attention to understandings of the self in relation work. The emerging discourse of desire is then used to make problematic prevailing assumptions within the dominant discourses of self, learning, and the meaning of work. Thoughtful consideration of these four discourses may help lead us to a deeper appreciation for the complexity and contradictions of learning in and through work.

Keywords: Workplace Learning, Adult Learning, Learning Organization

The idea of learning in and through work challenges common, everyday, person-on-the-street understandings of learning. If randomly selected adults were asked what learning means to them, they would undoubtedly say it involved studying books they are assigned to read or listening to someone lecture in a classroom setting. In the minds of many adults, learning is associated with hierarchically structured, authoritarian environments in which they had little to say over what they learned or how. Such an image of learning so prevalent among adults is understandable, given the twelve or more years in which we are socialized into a particular form of teaching and learning. This image of learning as something we do in a special place, in locations and buildings quite distinct from the everydayness of our lives, particularly our work lives, has dominated education and training in the United States and much of the western world for many years. Despite its roots in a progressive philosophy, even the term "adult education" conjures up for many images of highly structured classroom-based activities oriented to helping adults master the basics of reading, writing, and math - grown-up versions of elementary and secondary education.

Within the fields of HRD and adult education, however, we have seen an alternative understanding of learning emerge, the idea of work and the workplace as a major location for adult learning and development (Garrick, 1998; Welton, 1991). The breadth and scope of work-related learning is one of the most well-kept secrets in the United States. While considerable public debate surrounds policy and practice of elementary, secondary, and higher education at all levels of government, workplace learning continues to emerge as a sleeping giant of educational practice. Each year American corporations spend more on training than is spent for all of k-12 and higher education combined (Galvin, 2001). In the year 2001, over 14 million adults received workplace training. These figures largely reflect formal efforts in workplace learning, events which are organized and structured in somewhat formal and traditional ways. Yet, recent research clearly demonstrates that workplace learning is increasingly constituted by informal learning as well (Marsick and Watkins, 1990). When adults engaged in these forms of learning are included, the total number participating in workplace learning dwarfs other forms of educational practice. The phenomenon of workplace learning has clearly arrived as a legitimate and significant focus for educational research and theory.

Human Resource Development (HRD) has emerged as the field most closely aligned with understanding and fostering workplace learning. Over the last 20 years, the field has begun to develop a strong theoretical base that guides both its research and practice. As scholars continue to clarify and elaborate the phenomenon of workplace learning,

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differing and potentially contradictory conceptions have surfaced (Rowden, 1996), reflecting quite different understandings of the self, the meaning of work to the self and what it means to learn in and through work. In this symposium, we explore the major discourses surrounding workplace learning. For purposes of discussion, we refer to these ideas within three dominant discourses, design, demand, and development. We then examine the theory of desire, an emerging perspective in workplace learning (Fenwick, 2001), to help tease out assumptions and issues regarding the problem of subjectivity and meaning inherent in these two perspectives. Finally, the symposium poses further questions for exploration and research raised through an analysis of desire in workplace learning.

Before we review the dominant discourses of workplace learning within the field of HRD, it may be helpful to first clarify our understanding of what is meant by the term "workplace learning." We then situate our discussion of the dominant discourses within this understanding.

The Meaning of Workplace Learning

While we might agree that the workplace is an important location for adult learning, there is less agreement as to just what that means or what is meant by the term "workplace learning." Increased attention to this phenomenon has also highlighted the various ways in which this term has come to be understood. For example, formal learning in the workplace is typically associated with hierarchically structured technical training programs, with a formal curriculum that has been constructed by professional educators or trainers, and teachers or facilitators who "deliver" the curriculum to worker-learners. This form of workplace learning perhaps most closely approximates common understandings of what it means to learn and how this learning is organized and structured. In a 2001 survey, *Training* magazine reported that over three-fourths of the training sponsored by corporations takes place within traditional-looking classrooms structures (Galvin, 2001). Planned training on the job represents a variant of this more traditional model of workplace learning but retains its emphasis on specific outcomes and learning as a formal, carefully planned and structured activity (de Jong, Thijssen & Versloot, 2001).

Other scholars, however, stress the importance of workplace learning as primarily informal or incidental (Cseh, Watkins, & Marsick, 1999; Marsick & Volpe, 1999; Marsick & Watkins, 2001)). That is to say, learning often occurs "outside formally structured, institutionally sponsored classroom-based activities" (Marsick and Watkins, 1990, p. 7). It can include informal activities as self-directed learning, networking, coaching, mentoring, performance planning, or learning from particular incidents, such as involvement, trial and error, or the actions of others. A kind of hybrid of informal and formal learning has also evolved in the form of action learning (Yorks, O'Neil & Marsick), in which team members use somewhat more systematic and structured activities to study and learn from specific aspects of their work. In addition, attention to informal learning has spurred the idea of the "learning organization"(Senge, 1990) in which workplaces are organized and "sculpted" in such a way to integrate learning within one's work in an ongoing and continuous manner (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). In this sense, individual learning promotes and encourages group and organizational learning and change. For some within this viewpoint, the ideas of learning and work are inseparable.

Still, for others, the rhetoric of workplace learning masks the organizations' real concerns for increased performance and productivity (Garrick, 1998, Hart, 1990, 1995, Welton, 1991). While not necessarily denying the fact that learning occurs in and through work, these critics focus on how the language of workplace learning tends to distract us from more fundamental issues with regard to the worker and the organization of work. They point to "very important links between the ways in which work is organised, the content of work and 'opportunities' for employees and learning" (Garrick, 1998, pp. 56-57). They suggest the ways in which our understandings of workplace learning have paralleled historical changes in the workplace, from scientifically managed environments to "cybernetic learning organizations and enterprises (p. 56). According to these theorists, attention to workplace learning is subtly transforming our understandings and notions of knowledge to align more closely with the skills of "competent performance" and with pre-specified industry standards. Hart (1995), in particular, explores the ideological assumptions inherent in dominant notions of workplace learning and how these various conceptions have influenced women's work. Reflected in these historical changes are transformations of our sense of who we are as workers, as well as our broader sense of identity..

Despite the rhetoric surrounding workplace learning, its problematic nature remains with us. Employers expect immediate transfer of what is learned to the work performed and are often disappointed to see what little effect formal training has on long-term productivity or efficiency. Educators and trainers often find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place - trying to appease the goals of their employers yet trying to address the needs, interests, and desires of the workers themselves. Responding to employer demands and expectations, workplace educators plan and implement brief training programs they know to be of questionable value in the development of needed knowledge and skills.

Employers seek a number of skills among their desirable workers but seldom is adequate time devoted to the fostering and development of these complex skills. Workers often have little choice about participating in these programs, which typically fosters resentment and resistance to the employer's learning objectives. Workers often see formal learning programs irrelevant to the real needs they have in their work and largely a waste of time. In a recent national study of the use of integrated curriculum within adult literacy education, a middle aged-man participating in a workplace literacy program succinctly captured this tension. A welder in a large manufacturing plant, he was told to participate in a work-based program to help improve his reading skills. The curriculum was presumably grounded in the context of his work at the plant. When asked by a researcher what he thought about the reading program in which he was a student, he said that it was largely a waste of time. He perceived what they were teaching as having nothing to do with what he does on the job. He added, "Now if they would teach me how to read to my grandson, that would be something" (Dirkx & Prenger, 1997).

The phenomenon of workplace learning is constituted by numerous structures and processes and framed by broader organizational and social politics. Our understandings of this phenomenon - how we make sense of these questions, tensions, and potential contradictions - are shaped by three dominant discourses. For purposes of discussion, we have labeled these as the discourses of design, demand, and development. Within these different discourses, our understandings of workplace learning are shaped and bounded by particular assumptions about "self-in-context - the organizational contexts of particular institutions and corporations, and the broader socio-cultural contexts in which workplace learning and these organizations are embedded. Differing conceptions of workplace learning both shape and are shaped by differing understandings of the self that is engaged in the learning process.

The Discourses of Design and Demand

The discourse of design stresses specific products to be derived from the design and implementation of specific workplace learning activities. These products are clearly specified prior to the learning experience and serve to guide all phases of the planning, implementation, and assessment of workplace learning (Yelon, 1996). The notion of performance improvement within HRD and workplace learning are framed within a discourse of design (Torraco, 1999). While reflecting more contemporary issues and contexts, this perspective has its roots in early 20th century scientific management (Taylor, 1911) and scientific curriculum-making (Bobbitt, 1918) movements. Grounded in a behavioral psychology, the design perspective understands work as a composite of specific skills and knowledge that, with analysis, can be readily identified. The idea is to specify the knowledge and skills reflected in and needed by "real-world" performance and to select activities most appropriate to yielding these performances (Yelon, 1996). The difference between what the job requires and what workers already know and are able to do is considered the "gap" that workplace learning needs to address. Through their work, HRD practitioners aim to provide the specific skills and competencies workers need to know and do in order to meet the requirements of their jobs. Through the design and implementation of specific training interventions, workplace learning is intended to eliminate these deficiencies and contribute to the workers' overall productivity and performance.

In this discourse, workers are constructed as "knowable objects," (Fenwick, 2000, p. 295) and largely viewed and understood through measures of productivity and performance. It is a common language within the literature on workplace literacy and is reflected in modern-day versions of task analyses being applied to developing training curriculum, such as the increasingly popular WorkKeys program produced by ACT (http://www.act.org/workkeys). According to ACT, WorkKeys can help "employers identify and develop workers for a wide range of skilled jobs, students and workers document and advance their employability skills, and educators tailor instructional programs to help students acquire the skills employers need." In helping to foster a stronger workforce, ACT believes WorkKeys is contributing to the economic health of our nation. This discourse stresses the importance of competency-based curricula and measurable outcomes of training, carefully linked to both local and global measures of productivity and economic well-being.

As it was initially conceived, the discourse of design reflects a largely individualistic and causal perspective on the process of workplace learning. Individuals are responsible for production and performance, and training is targeted to address the skills they needed to contribute to the overall performance of the organization. For the most part, worker-learners are seen as largely passive recipients of knowledge and skill they are determined to need in order to more productive and effective. Increasingly, however, this "design" perspective is yielding to a somewhat more complex understanding of the relationship of the worker to the work and the organizational context in which this work is done. We refer to this emerging discourse as the discourse of demand. This discourse, shaped and influenced by performance

improvement (Swanson, 1999) and systems theory (Checkland, 1981), seeks to recognize the role that context plays in workplace learning and how the various elements of that context serve to ultimately determine the nature of workplace learning. The demand perspective stresses the socio-technical context (Dillon, 2000) in which individuals engage in workplace learning and in which organizations support investments in workplace learning. According to Dillon (2000), "Unlike the pragmatism of usability engineering which aims to support the design of technologies that are compatible with users' abilities and needs, [socio-technical systems theory] posits underlying drives and motivations to use tools that supersede concerns with effectiveness and efficiency alone" (p. 119). Socio-technical approaches blur prevailing distinctions between structuralist, human relations, and open systems approaches. The goals of organizations, individuals, and the work itself create a framework for workplace learning that can at times stimulate, restrict, or redirect learning. Throughout history individuals have had the basic survival requirements of food, shelter, and clothing that demand productive effort and the necessity to learn. Similarly, organizations have the basic demands of survival and growth that necessitate learning. Within this symposium, the discourse of demand is examined in terms of (1) the integrity of a symbiotic relationship within a productive context and (2) the effects of exploitation on workplace learning (workers exploiting their organizations or organizations exploiting their workers.

Thus, within the discourse of demand, workplace learning reflects a complex relationship between the individual, the work, and the organization. While the somewhat simplistic, linear, and causal notions of earlier design perspectives have been challenged, the discourse of demand stresses the role of learning in the life, performance, and productivity of the organization. Workplace learning is viewed as a function not only of individual ability, style, or the resources made available to the learner but also the role of the group and organizational context in shaping the nature of workplace learning.

The discourse of demand focuses our attention on motivational issues and broader organizational contexts neglected by the discourse of design. It stresses the limitations to our understanding of approaches which rely almost exclusively on mechanistic assumptions of workplace learning (Bierema, 1996). Yet, the discourse of demand ultimately seems concerned with organizational performance rather than learning and development of individual workers. In a sense, the individual learner is a kind of "cog" (albeit an important one) in a complex system of interacting components. In contrast to the discourses of design and demand, the discourse of development offers a more organismic perspective on the workplace and the self as worker in these contexts.

The Discourse of Development

In contrast to the discourse of design and, to some degree, the discourse of demand, the fundamental assumptions which characterize the discourse of development are grounded in the progressive education movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While it maintained close connections with industrial training and agriculture, the progressive movement stressed the idea of education as a continuous reconstruction of living experience (Dewey, 1938), with the adult learner and his or her experience at the center of the educational endeavor (Lindeman, 1926). The progressive movement challenged what many perceived to be the mechanistic and functional views of education being fostered through scientific curriculum making. The discourse of development stresses the active role that the worker plays in the process of learning and the relationship of the "curriculum" of work to the experience, beliefs, and perceptions that the worker brings to the workplace. While it would be inaccurate to characterize this perspective solely as a "learner-centered" approach, the process of learning is conceptualized as starting with what the learner brings to the context of learning. What workers come to know and understand through the process of workplace learning reflects who they are as persons and how they are making sense of their experiences in the workplace.

The discourse of development is also heavily informed by a humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1968; Rogers & Freiburg, 1994). This discourse stresses development, fulfillment, and self-actualization of the worker (Bierema, 1996). Seeking to further his or her self-actualization within and through work, the worker's development, rather than specific skills and knowledge is viewed as the primary focus for workplace learning. The practice of HRD, then, is understood to focus on the development of the worker as a whole person, not merely the particular knowledge and skills related to his or her particular job. According to Bierema (1996), "A holistic approach to the development of individuals in the context of a learning organization produces well-informed, knowledgeable, critical-thinking adults who have a sense of fulfillment and inherently make decisions that cause an organization to prosper" (p. 22).

While rejecting the mechanistic discourse of design, the discourse of development reflects aspects of the discourse of demand, through its stress on the *learning organization* (Watkins, 1996; Watkins and Marsick, 1993), and the interconnectedness of all aspects of organizational life, including the overall well-being and development of the individual

worker. It is an organic understanding of wholes and relationships. While the systems view and the concept of the learning organization seek to move us from the machine-like structures and processes which dominate the discourse of design to more fluid, connected networks, Bierema (1996) reminds us that the fundamental task of organizational learning and development is development of the individual worker. Within this view, workplace learning is understood as a process of reflectively learning from and acting on one's experience within the workplace. Rather than a passive recipient of knowledge and skills perceived by others to be needed by the workers, in the discourse of development the worker is viewed as more actively involved in identifying what he or she already knows and how that knowledge can serve as a platform or structure for further learning and development. Typically, this learning occurs within the context of self-directed or self-managed groups or teams organized to promote both individual and organizational learning.

Implicit in each of these dominant views of workplace learning are assumptions about the nature of the self and the processes of self-formation that are at least potentially present within the workplace. In the next section, we will summarize an emerging perspective within workplace learning, that of desire. By looking at workplace learning through the lens of desire, we will make more explicit and problematic the assumptions of the self and learning reflected in the discourses of design, demand, and development.

The Discourse of Desire

A discourse of desire represents postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives on workplace learning and is grounded in the work of the psychoanalytic scholar Jacque Lacan (Fuery, 1995), among others. For the most part, dominant discourses around workplace learning suggest that the process is characterized largely by a linear progression. This process results in a one-way path from ignorance to knowledge, in which knowledge is viewed as a substance (Felman, 1987). The discourse of desire challenges both this way of thinking about learning and our understanding of knowledge (Butler, 1999; Todd, 1997). Unlike the progressive understanding of learning reflected in the discourses of design and development, a psychodynamic view suggests learning proceeds through "breakthroughs, leaps, discontinuities, regressions, and deferred action" Felman, 1987). Knowledge is considered not be a substance but a structural dynamic, arising from and characterizing the interactions between and among persons. It is not restricted to a single individual but is inherently dialogical. From the perspective of a theory of desire, learning requires the presence of an "other" and it is in that relationship with the other that learning, if it occurs at all, takes place. In this sense, the discourse of desire shares with the sociotechnical view a reliance on and concern for unconscious motivations and drives in the process of workplace learning. A discourse of desire points us to the unconscious dynamics of learning, and the complexity and paradoxes which characterize its presence in our lives.

The discourse of desire seeks to make problematic our dominant perspectives of workplace learning and their underlying assumptions. It takes its cue from the rumblings of alienation and disaffection which continue to haunt workplace learning efforts, despite the seemingly humanistic organizational reforms of the past 25 years. In this sense, we might think of the discourse of desire as a discourse of unmasking the inherently problematic nature of workplace learning. According to Fenwick (2000), educators who seek to "help workers thrive and serve a vocational community [confront] workers' struggles to find meaning and purpose in jobs where they seem increasingly to experience anxiety, stress, sadness, and despair. These are fundamental issues of identity related to work and the human quest to understand and unfold self" (Fenwick, 2000, p. 297). The study of self and identity strongly suggests that this struggle is integrally bound up with an impulse to learn and develop. The workplace, then, becomes a location for constructing a sense of self in the world (Britzman, 1998). Fenwick argues that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, this human quest involves recognition of the psychic events that make up our lives, the ways in which we often push many of these events - anxieties, fears, disruptions, mistakes, vicissitudes of love and hate - into the background out of conscious awareness. Learning something new and the prospects of change can bring us face to face with these unconscious aspects of ourselves. While the ego might perceive this learning as a threat to itself and garner defenses against the change, significant learning involves a working through of the "conflicts of all these psychic events and gradually coming to tolerate the self and its desires (p. 299). Thus, the discourse of desire and how it frames our discernment of the self suggests our studies of workplace learning must be grounded in a deeper understanding of the complex relationship that exists between a person's psyche and their experience in the workplace. Discourses of design, demand, and development do not adequately address either the complexities or the possibilities of the self or its relationships within the workplace. They may even circumscribe a practitioner's ability to perceive and address the gnawing existential problems surfacing within the world of work.

At the heart of work, then, are notions of desire and interference (Fenwick, 2001). Desire itself surfaces a sense of

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change, arising from this deep sense of the unfolding self, of wanting something to be different. But at the same time desire also evokes a sense of resistance to change and to learning. Recognition of this fact allows for an appreciation of work and workplace learning as a place where profound pedagogical encounters can occur. When we recognize and tap into this paradoxical situation, we often find new energies and enthusiasm emerging for our work. These energies, however, might be running counter to the established order or those purposes prescribed by educators or organizational leaders. For example, workers may at times subvert explicit efforts to "empower" them or other efforts to shape them in a particular way. They may resist such "learning-centered" approaches which seek actively engage the learner within his or her experience. Dominant discourses of workplace learning might lead us to interpret such acts as not going along with the organization's purposes or not wanting to learn and grow. When viewed through the discourse of desire, however, we might recognize workers as increasingly constructing and regulating their own "human capital." In this sense, workplace learning is interpreted through the discourse of desire as a form of transgression and resistance (Fenwick, 2001). Through these opportunities for and various forms of resistance, workplace educators seek the possibilities for work, learning, and identity construction.

Implications for Research and Practice in Workplace Learning

One of the objectives of this symposium is to foster awareness of the different ways in which we frame and come to understand workplace learning, and the consequences that ensue from such an understanding for ourselves as scholar-practitioners, for the organizations for which we work, and for the worker-learners. When we begin to think about our work in terms of the discourse itself, we develop a deeper appreciation for the complexities at the core of workplace learning. Ideas such as workplace literacy, informal learning, and the learning organization have dramatically increased our attention to the notion of workplace learning. Much of this rhetoric suggests a powerful potential for learning waiting to be tapped within the workplace. Yet, in reality the idea of work and the workplace as a location for adult learning and development remains problematic. Different groups with different interests attempt to control the discourse of workplace learning and the ways it comes to be understood within the organization and the broader community. Profound ideological differences bubble away just below the surface of workplace learning programs. Workers and educators alike struggle with the consequences of attempting to enact grand visions for workplace learning with the broader political spheres of the organization.

Both the problematic nature of work and efforts to reform and improve organizations and the workplace underscore the problem of meaning in workplace learning. Despite the press of these reform efforts, or perhaps because of them, workers continue to feel alienated and disenfranchised from their work (Hart, 1993; Saul, 1995; Rifkin, 1995). Employees' perceptions of themselves as workers has been eroded through organizational restructuring, downsizing, and re-engineering. Many are now seeking greater alignment between the work they do and personal values they hold deeply, such as attachment and spirituality (Fox, 1994; Mitroff & Denton, 1999).

Ongoing tensions continue to float in and around the nature of the work, its organization and structure, its capacity for fostering learning and development, and the personal desires of individual workers. These symptoms raise questions regarding the meaningfulness of formal workplace learning programs. Depending within what discourse of workplace learning we are framing these problems, we come to understand them differently and seek different "solutions." Implementing these solutions often becomes part of and further elaborates the fundamental nature of the problem. For example, emphasis is being placed on working and learning collaboratively and relationally, empowering workers, creating learning organizations, learning communities, communities of practice, and fostering reflection in practice. But organizational emphasis on quality standards, measurable performance, and competition tends to reinforce the organization's authority, sending mixed messages to both workers and educators and contributing to worker disenchantment and frustration with workplace learning programs. And both perspectives tend to ignore the complex workings of desire which shape the worker's thinking and feeling about learning.

The various discourses we use to frame our conversations and actions in workplace learning serve to help us *see* some important dimensions of this phenomenon but they also prevent us from perceiving other critical aspects. Consideration of these different discourses and the ways in which they shape our theory and practice in HRD provide for a deeper understanding of the complexity and contradictory nature of workplace learning.

Dirkx is chair and organizer of this session, and the primary author of this paper. In the session, the panelists will respond, from their respective theoretical positions, to the principle points of the paper.

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